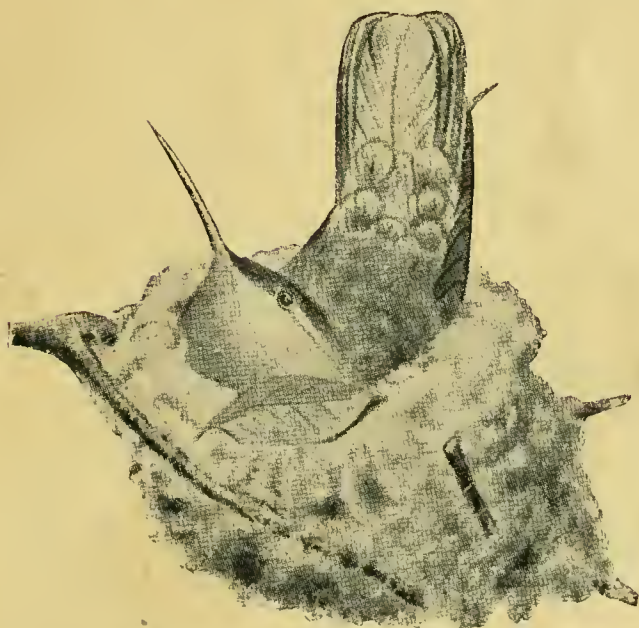


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A Luxemburg Idyll in Early Iowa



By WELKER GIVEN

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Tete de Mort.

That our rich agricultural Iowa first attracted attention as a mining section is as certain as it seems odd. Long before the farm value of the prairies was understood, the lead deposits in the peculiar and limited section near Dubuque were sought. Over the river Galena became a flourishing center of such mining and smelting before Chicago amounted to anything.

The Dubuque-Galena district, arousing interest among lead producers the world over, was specially noteworthy in old Luxemburg where that industry has been long practiced. Luxemburgers were among the first to work the Galena field, also to prospect just over the Mississippi in the narrow strip of similar hills on the Iowa side. West of the great river the pockets of lead proved rather shallow, but some prospectors who penetrated westward up a little valley into Iowa found something else quite as attractive to another class of sturdy yet beauty loving Luxemburgers. Back to old Luxemburg they sent word of a surpassing valley abounding not only in charm but in springs, wood for fuel and shelter for stock, the lack of which then kept the prairies of small avail for settlers. In response there came to early Iowa midway between Dubuque and Bellevue a thrifty, cheery band of immigrants devoted to plain living and high sentiment who developed in semi-seclusion in the sheltered valley of Tete de Mort what J. W. Aylward has since described as "one of the quaintest settlements in America", a village which a much nearer neighbor, Eli Cole of Bellevue, has vividly pictured as "a little French island in the American sea, the priceless gem of St. Donatus".

True to ancestral custom these Luxemburgers mined if not for lead for rock and built homes of Tete de Mort limestone. The two dozen peasant-like houses at St. Donatus (the one village of the Luxemburger township) are two story, cemented in sandy yellow outside to age like adobe and thus look as if centuries old, weathered like those in Europe. Without eaves, built mostly in blocks close up to the road, sometimes with the stable under the same low pitched roof, they make the wondering visitor doubt whether he is still in the United States. With some accessories that might seem crude were they not so quaint, St. Donatus does not fail to display the Luxemburg taste for the scenic and for works of man that if humble are in high accord. Thus our Iowa state geologist, T. E. Savage, reporting on that section, had to drop for a moment the severe language of science to dilate on the beautiful view over a charming valley across the gentle Maquoketa slopes up to where a little chapel lifts the cross to heaven from the bleak Niagara crest.

Valuing education as they did beauties of nature, the pioneer Luxemburg villagers drew from old Luxemburg a young educator, J. Michel Flammang, who came from the duchy to young Iowa eight years before our civil war. The immigrant-educator was only twenty-eight, his charge for school and church was long made up of former peasants, they withstood an economic grind harder than later settlers knew when the railroad went with them out on the prairies; but the record the little band of Luxemburgers made in the beautiful but contracted valley of Tete de Mort was true to form.

Tete de Mort is unique. It is close to the center of that paradise for geologists, the narrow strip of "driftless" in Iowa, exempt from the early invasions of the ice age. When Julien Dubuque secured his mining claim from

the Indians forty odd years before the settlement of Iowa he appears to have had rather better intuitions than some other Frenchmen. "Tete de Mort," as memorial of an ancient Indian battle and pile of skulls, did not appeal to him in plural or singular; he termed the stream at his southern boundary Mesquabysnonques or Red Humming Bird, as some translate it, with the daring suggestion of that sylph of beauty actually in that valley in Indian times. Anyway it is a scenic spot worthy of such a name and of the Luxemburg Kasses, Kriders, Polgers, and Tritzes who later gave it treatment characteristic of them and appropriate to it.

Landscape artists say the setting of this village at the Western end of the township, and over three miles back from the Mississippi at the point where two Iowa-like valleys unite to form a rarer one, is what principles of art would dictate. The mile wide basin lies in an amphitheater of two hundred foot hills with gentle slopes for half a mile each way, then steep, at last rugged cliffs with detached escarpments of Niagara limestone. As in Tom Moore's Avoca bright waters meet, St. Katherine's creek dividing the village and joining the Tete de Mort to make a farewell meander across the valley preparatory to a more hurried straight away four mile run in deepening erosion to the Mississippi. The one store, the village blacksmith's shop, the two churches and the two dozen stone houses are set just as a painter would want them for a well spread picture.

The history of Tete de Mort is as unique as its aspect. The young educator Michel Flammang reached Iowa fresh from the educational aspirations of Luxemburg at the time when higher education for women was rising in popular view. One of his great ambitions lay that way as was soon to appear. Promptly after his arrival Flammang in

the fifties assisted in establishing the first rural high school for boys in Iowa a few miles off at Key West and a later one he founded at the St. Donatus cross roads. Likewise he began early to plan for a boarding school for the higher education of girls and actually established the first institution of that character in Iowa in a four story building at this remote village where the rattle of a railroad has not been heard to this day.

Father Michel, though he long contributed to what was oddly called the "Luxemburg Gazette" (published in Dubuque) left little in print about his inspiration touching higher education of girls. Doubtless religious in the main and aiming at preservation of the mother tongue together with other inheritances from Luxemburg, it had a phase which seems to have been left in more formal expression by other educators of that day though they never practiced it as did Flammang—namely, the training of girls in a charmed Ruritania where nature's teachings would re-enforce those of the school.

I recall a statement of that aspiration by another educator who probably never heard of Flammang or St. Donatus. A. A. Lipscomb was an educator of an educational family but not privileged to carry out his ideas as did Flammang. He was a Protestant with his ancestors rooted in this country from Colonial times; he reflected the idea of pastoral surroundings for girls in formative years from a different angle. Sixty odd years ago, however, Lipscomb welcomed higher education for girls with an American desire, earnest as any of Luxemburg, that where possible it should be conducted away from the temptations and distractions of city life. Lipscomb deplored for the young girl surroundings or influences near or "in and for the open world with the prizes of ambition—social position, wealth, luxury, fashion—rendered intensely

attractive to her stimulated, feverish heart". Instead, for all his advanced ideas on intellectual training of girls, Lipscomb was in close if unconscious line with the devotee of St. Donatus when he praised the ideal of training for women "to open the mind to the inspiring gladness of nature, to learn the lessons of beauty in the fresh scenes of each recurring day, to bow down before the sublimities of nature and be exalted by their presence . . . to find and lay the heart close to a redeemed spot of earth and sink silently into a rapture of joy."

Observe: not preparation for life but living it to the full.

Modern education is not as new as it thinks with its vacation camps, boy scout tours, field trips and the like to enlist apperception, as they say nowadays. The Flam-mangs reached out for that and far more three score years ago—for nature's soothing and magical voices heard amid scenes of humble life, of moderate labor, small profits yet content.

Though painful to suggest anything but high thinking in such a scene, it must be admitted rural people often appear dead to the beauty amid which they live. Ruskin says it would seem in the Alps we should have the peace and fellowship of the human soul with nature, but it is not so. The goats on the rocks have as much joy in the mountain beauty as the mountaineers who live there. Every night in cities people assemble in opera houses to gaze on stage scenes depicting peasants in gay ribands and white bodices, singing sweet songs and bowing gracefully to picturesque crosses when in fact the Alpine peasants live in foul huts, deforming the inexpressible loveliness about them with piles of refuse, ignorant of the name of beauty. Ruskin's explanation is that through the middle ages people of gentle natures gathered in cities to

avoid the incessant raids and small wars of the exposed country while the turbulent and heavy handed remained where they would be suitably engaged. If there be truth in that it must be exaggerated. Thousands, whether rustics or city agnostics, who deny the subconscious, reject the spiritual altogether, nevertheless submerge themselves in it when they feel what stirs within when they gaze on beauty in the material forms of nature. Doubtless many rustics have appreciated such beauty better than they can say. It does not always need a miracle to reveal the infinite: Nature can do it for the responsive who walk humbly.

However it may be with others, the charge of sordid or sodden materialism will not hold against the wakened and thrifty Luxemburgers. Those people have no large city; rustics and villagers in Europe, fond of country pastimes, wedding dances and music, devoted in religion, they are lovers of rural beauty and the poetry and legends that go with it. Significant the battle a band of them waged with American pioneer materialism even when they knew not all they did, testing out a new education under the leadership of Flammang. In Tete de Mort as surely as in the Avoca where the bright waters met there was a bloom of the valley, a crystal and a green, a soft magic of streamlet and hill, with a dash of bold crag not seen in Tom Moore's vale together with nearly all that Goldsmith sang of Auburn, the loveliest village of the plain.

Embracing and valuing nature more than the most advanced of today, those old educators thought to prepare for life by living life, they aimed to enrich youth with beauty not for preparation but realization, knowing spiritual seed is never as well planted as with simple human life on one side and glorified nature on the other. The idea of Flammang especially was to hold his own Luxem-

burg people in loved Tete de Mort and draw in sympathetic pupils from outside to remain in formative years under a dual influence, the loveliness of nature and the lowliness of man.

If this high wrought purpose had an immediate environment highly favorable, it was yet an island washed on many sides by the rough waves of the advancing American pioneers.

To the query whether it made finally a successful resistance we must answer yes and no.

Though from a church standpoint the results are a marvel to this day, most outsiders would qualify a further verdict. The boys' high school is now a dwelling, the seminary reduced to a country district school. No boarding pupils have come for over forty years.

A wanderer there today wondering at the four story stone seminary building in a mere hamlet, hardly a fourth part now in use, may sit on the stile over which the girl boarders used to come and go in their walks, or, if more favored he may have one of the few lingering sisters show him the deserted but spotless dormitories, the little beds unused for long decades; yet though he mourn some halcyon days of this Ruritania, he must not fail to climb the hill to the high shrine back of the waned academy, as both home and visiting maids did once, to follow a path where the lesson has not lapsed in any degree.

Remembering doubtless the charmed religio-historic Chaple du Bildchen in old Luxemburg near Vianden, the idealistic young priest in America established a replica such as is said to be unknown elsewhere this side the Atlantic—a series of fourteen open air altar stations of the cross on the winding way back of church and seminary up the little mountain to the crowning shrine, "fair as a

star when only one is shining in the sky," and visible in three valleys, each worshipper's brick alcove with picture, motto in three languages and a low bench for bent knees.

The wayfarer must tread lightly the made-path of soft turf carpeting a rocky way to the Niagara shrine crest, once in bleak contrast to the silver-green below, now too softened by evergreens. Up there he may hear the village blacksmith's hammer softened by distance, the cock's shrill clarion rendered faint, perchance drowsy tinklings that lull distant folds and lowing herds that wind slowly o'er the lea, while the nearer bells of church and school will certainly be sweet though no note in them or in any echoing horn can disturb the educator-priest who sleeps with his mother by his side in the little churchyard between his two waned schools at the foot of his stations of the cross where he labored twenty-six years.

Yet even in the best days at St. Donatus there were mischances. Thus when at one of Flammang's unique church celebrations, Luxemburg style, men were firing a cannon near the seminary a premature explosion killed several and sent parts of their bodies over the buildings, the roar of the gun could not have been helpful to a girl's school had there been no horror of death. So when a boarding pupil taken with an infectious disease had to be sent home to save the others. The country roads being at the time impassible for vehicles the girl was carried on a litter many miles to the nearest station, where, however, the conductor would not receive her. She died soon after and the railroad refused to ship the body. That was before the time of public regulation of railroads, when they still did about as they pleased. Though the girl's body was finally taken aboard the incident certainly showed the necessity of having seminaries in close touch with hospitals or railroads at least.

Some time later, but while this Luxemburg paradise was hardly out of the rare and rural stage, it came into collision with the railroad again at another angle. The iron horse, as the locomotive was breezily termed, was proving many ways hard to tame down to a gentleness suited to his appearance so near as the lower end of the idyllic valley. This steed was indeed a type of the hostile force spreading around and beyond Tete de Mort, of the ripping power that was breaking the stubborn glebe of the prairies, six or eight goaded oxen on the pull, or of the lumberjacks and rough necks rafting down the great river four miles off.

The second time the railroad broke through the defense of the Rurina of the Tete de Mort it was to tempt some of the strong armed but gentle hearted Luxemburgers off to the rough pioneer districts to the westward, not to haggle over taking out a boarding pupil smitten with contagion. In the late seventies with the second generation in full activity and a third coming rapidly on, no Flammang could prevent a swarming from Tete de Mort. The Rurina of that valley might have held aloof from the breaking plows to the westward, the prairie schooners, the railroad gangs, the roustabouts and the lumberjacks, but not against the overcrowded condition of the loved but now too narrow valley. Yet Flammang, expostulating with parishioners who were yielding to the temptation of cheap and abundant tillable acres farther west, in a protesting farewell address, advised them when they went to the nearest railway station on the Mississippi to throw their children into the river that their bodies and not their souls should be lost in the outside world.

We know now Father Michel's fears were overwrought. The departing young folks did not go to perdition; they went where they could raise more corn and

money but seem without doubt to have taken their religion with them, developing leaders like the Rev. Joseph Tritz out on the stormy prairies. We need not sigh for those swarmers from the hive. Necessarily the materialism of that day cut a wide swath around and far beyond Tete de Mort, out where physical force had a great work to do in a short time. The ambitious young people of St. Donatus had to make some sacrifice to that besieging force; the fears of Flammang were unjustified,—yet we hate to make any concession to that other phase of nineteenth century practicality which beguiled the boarding school pupils from going longer to Tete de Mort. “Insatiate archer, could not one suffice?” In the case of the girls the reaction of the materialism of the day on the spirit of the sylvan retreat seems more distressing, unduly extended; the oil of industrialism would not mix with the waters of Luxemburg idealism even for them. The typewriter was beginning to click, the voice of the telephone girl was heard in the land. Lovely as the scenery was at St. Donatus, unique the villagers, could such things develop business women? The call of education was back where whistles sounded and engine bells rang, near the marts, offices, shops, factories. Such was the American response to the lovely Luxemburg idyll of girl training in the precincts of a Rurina where nature was to help charm away feverish attractions of luxury and fashion to substitute those of a simple life in another sweet Auburn. Worse than the cannon explosion was the recall of American practicality as it finally penetrated to the girls’ seminary in the sylvan retreat and condemned the four story building in the little hamlet to stand in part as monument to a beautiful failure.

More than that. Flammang was wiser than he himself knew. Our profoundest educators today in their struggle to maintain cultural studies in some just relation

to vocational can appreciate now as never before such a loss of the aesthetic from its best place and scope, namely in the uplift of a scenic environment beheld in youth athwart the simple life of musical and legend-loving villagers—charms not analyzed or consciously studied but absorbed; as Lipscomb said, the pupil bowing down to be exalted, a supreme lesson, taught without teaching.

If we turn to the native male youth of the valley we find the serpent that crept into their Eden carried a base ball and bat. A story in point tells of the introduction of base ball at St. Donatus. The homebred youth had plenty of muscle for batting and making the bases; for long they would persist in running on a foul. The hard thing for them was the change of gear to avoid waste effort and husband every breath of efficiency. If historians find it difficult to say just when decline sets in with a nation, still more so when it has progressed so far that recovery is impossible, it is not so with Tete de Mort. Considering not the religious spirit, still undiminished, only the romantic Luxemburg ideals transplanted to early Iowa, we may suspect the crisis was reached when baseball entered the bucolic valley. When the ingenuous youth of Tete de Mort fell to the American game and that spirit was made ruler over sport as over business, monarch of efficiency, punch, teamwork, drives and every phase of bounce, Calypso and her nymphs must have fled the valley as the beloved of the Lord fled the city on the plain.

Any way the fact must be faced of the Tete de Mort boys mastering base ball after a time, for the later generation is as capable as any on fouls and knows a deal about building character into salesmanship and harnessing many kinds of energy close to production, American style.

For all their reverence some lingering old-time laity tell yet sotto voce an occasional bluff tale of Flammang as

when he awarded an inattentive altar boy a slap that sent the lad reeling to the floor, also his throwing back to the pews in contempt a hard times collection that yielded only pennies—all apocryphal it may be but showing another facet of the recollections left by a personality decided and disciplinary as well as devout.

It was not all gold at old St. Donatus nor did everything glitter there even in the palmiest days of Father Flammang. He must have remembered how Achilles stopped singing and playing his harp to put pork chops on to cook. For some years there were as many saloons as churches in Tete de Mort and they appear not to have been as innocent as the one at Goldsmith's Auburn where the maid kissed the cup before it went round, for when Father Flammang demanded earlier closing than the law required he had to appear in person waving his crucifix and causing a wild stampede of revelers through back doors and windows. If the old time villagers were far more poetic some ways than their hardheaded American neighbors in adjoining townships they fell short of American taste in others. Perhaps it was because they had never been affected by the sight or tradition of the rock-hewn caverns of religion in old Luxemburg where Druids once offered firstlings of flocks in sacrifice that these American could make no sufficient allowance for a secular survival when they saw the carcass of a sheep or hog or quarter of a steer hung up to cool on a hook on the front wall of a St. Donatus dwelling right over the flower beds. Similar lack of misty tradition left them unappreciative when they beheld high piles of manure in front of houses, not knowing that in some parts of Europe the size of such heaps is a peasant's high sign of wealth.

But such things, exaggerated perhaps, are all long gone even if true. The St. Donatus of today remains



picturesque in appearance but only one way archaic since the Frerichs, Kniefs and Feldermans have multiplied with the Manders, Wagners, Duponts, Franks and Kalmeses. The Catholic church to the north prizes a relic from the skeleton of the pilgrim Donatus who died over a thousand years ago, other old tokens of religion are cherished both sides of the valley, while the secular rude and rare of Flammang's time linger as a last rose of his summer in the love of a generation thrifty, practical and up to date as any villagers in Iowa.

But though Father Flammang's seminary had to suspend, and his high school had to be reduced to the scope of an ordinary rural district school, he had other results that would have satisfied his masters in old Luxemburg. Little Tete de Mort has supplied thirteen priests to the Catholic church and sixty-three sisters for the veil. To appreciate such results from one church in a hilly township it must be remembered that the district has little over half the tillable ground of an average prairie township, with a like reduced wealth and population. On the same scale one of the smaller Iowa cities of say twenty-five thousand would need to have produced seven hundred ministers and over three thousand women of the veil if its forces were likewise diverted from material success to things spiritual. Surely his own communion at least, if it think the old seminary scheme a failure, must account it a noble failure.

Turning to the other side of St. Donatus we find things less picturesque perhaps but arresting. The Lutheran church, which is the first building passed on the scenic highway from the south, is an astonishing structure in a village or country township. In contrast one way to what the other old timers did across the valley, the Lutherans to the south show achievements that are equally astonishing in a situation so rural. Here, too, religion is

potent but in another phase. We are told these German Protestants had a church there in 1918 sufficient for all needs, but immediately after the armistice they were moved without drive or pressure to erect this one as a thank-offering to the Lord for the end of the world war. Moreover, in modern fashion it provides for the social life of the people; not omitting a thoroughly equipped kitchen, it registers co-operative effort so up to date as to enliven the antique individuality of the old stone dwellings below.

This Protestant church has a site that is a picturesque counterpart of the Catholic one a mile away across the valley. The two face each other not unkindly, as if in noble rivalry. If the church to the north is unrivalled in the altar stations which sanctify the winding way that leads from it and from the old seminary up to the shrine on the rocky top of the little mountain, the other has for background a hill almost identical which, however, has been left unchanged by man, even to the slabs of limestone it has cast down in ages past and the great outstanding, poised, challenging crag that is to crash down in some future century where the church now stands—a reminder of inevitable end ever before the living. So, too, if on one side of the new church the old churchyard with its even white stones shows in certain far lights as if a great flock of white swans had lighted that side of the sanctuary off on the East solemn slabs of blue-gray limestone have been arrested in their fall and poised by nature like the pages of a half-open Bible of stone.

A full cup of religion is borne today by the excellent Father Vallaster and the worthy Pastor Herforth; between them Tete de Mort is one hundred per cent churched. No grave crime has ever been perpetrated in that district, lunacy has ever been as unknown as poverty, and divorce remains impossible, the giant evils of modern civilization

all banned. Narrowing the view to the civic, we have on one side this valley, where foreign tongues were long almost the only speech, the patriotic thankoffering of the Lutheran church and on the other the church school merged into the public, the uplifting tradition where Flammang sleeps, with the work of the boy who carved on the door of the Franks long ago the eagle of American democracy destroying the serpent of foreign tyranny. "Viert Juli" is not heard as frequently now, but Fourth of July sentiment holds both sides of the valley.



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